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Broadband Comes to SW Alaska

BLM PERMITS MAKE A DIFFERENCE



Steve Fuslier

Installation of remote repeater on BLM-administered lands at Cone Mountain, north of Goodnews Bay.

When you look at a current map of Alaska showing broadband internet services, you'll notice something is missing—broadband in much of rural Alaska. For about 750 households and 9,000 residents in 65 Southwest Alaska communities, that is about to change. When the *Terrestrial for Every Region of Rural Alaska* or TERRA-Southwest, fiber optic and microwave network project is completed in early 2012, much of Southwest Alaska won't have to rely solely on satellite communications with limited bandwidth and high costs. The project is two years ahead of schedule in part due to accelerated processing of the land use permits and rights-of-way from the BLM Anchorage Field Office.

Funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the TERRA-Southwest project has the potential to improve the local communications infrastructure, create jobs, and build the local economy. Better connectivity can make a difference for classrooms, search and rescue, law enforcement, emergency management or rural businesses.

"TERRA-Southwest is a historic project. It has great importance to our health corporation and our region," says Gene Peltola of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation. Healthcare in the region can't help but change with broadband. Telemedicine

technologies, including digital imaging and videoconferencing, can allow consultations with doctors and other medical specialties beyond the village, and improve distance diagnosis and treatment.

Better connectivity will benefit the BLM's management of approximately 1.5 million acres of public lands it manages in Southwest Alaska's Bristol Bay and Goodnews Bay regions.

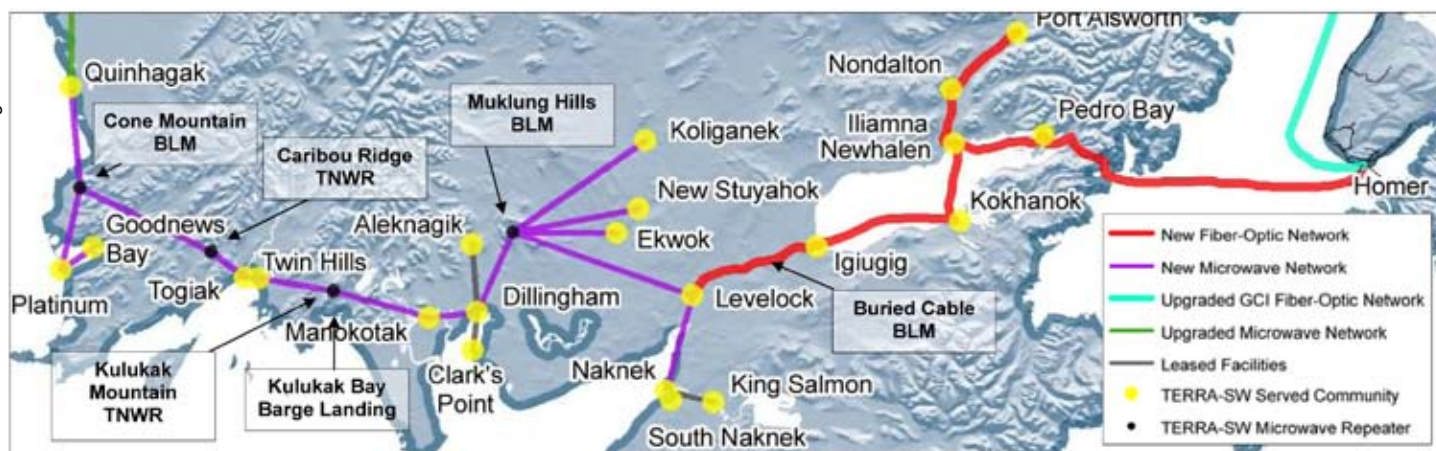
When acting Anchorage District Manager Jim Fincher attended the TERRA-Southwest ribbon-cutting ceremony in Dillingham last August, he was thanked by the CEOs of Kanakanak Hospital and General Communications Inc. (GCI) for facilitating the required permits and rights-of-way. Fincher acknowledges processing normally takes significant time and resources. Once in a while, a project comes along so critical to local communities that it merits extra

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Helicopter transporting material to Muklung Hill.





Map of project area from environmental assessment.

Broadband

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effort, time and resources by all involved. “This project is a great example of BLM partnering with industry, communities and other agencies to complete a project that is very relevant to local residents,” Fincher says. It also underscores the importance of BLM’s permitting work.

The TERRA-Southwest project is nearly complete, despite the massive technical challenges involved in an area without a road system and with Alaska’s climate and geological realities. The BLM Anchorage District worked with other agencies to complete the environmental assessment for the proposed rights-of-way and permits. That analysis concluded the immense

benefit to communities far outweighed any negligible impacts to federal lands and resources.

Last summer, United Utilities, Inc. (a subsidiary of GCI) used heavy-lift helicopters to deliver communications and power modules to mountaintop microwave-repeater sites, including BLM’s remote Cone Mountain and Muklung Hills.

Beyond BLM-managed public lands, new fiber-optic cable lies at the bottom of Cook Inlet between Homer and Williamsport, Kachemak Bay and Iliamna Bay. A pole-hung fiber optic segment is in the mountain pass between Williamsport and Pile Bay. Village microwave towers are nearly complete in Levelock, New Stuyahok, Koliganek,

Ekwok, Naknek, Dillingham, Manokotak, Goodnews Bay and Platinum.

The BLM Anchorage District Office is now moving forward for its part of the environmental analysis of a TERRA-Northwest project that will provide broadband connectivity to villages in the Unalakleet area, and eventually to Nome and surrounding villages.

The TERRA projects are great examples of the ways public lands enhance the quality of life in communities across Alaska and the Nation. For those 9,000 residents, it isn’t the project, but the results that are going to change life in Southwest Alaska.

—Teresa McPherson,
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On Assignment in Alaska



Karen Laubenstein

Kris Long with a flyfishing pole on the Delta River.

In August I took a whirlwind weekend road tour and stayed three days at the BLM Tangle Lakes

Alaska was an unforgettable experience for me. As a long-time BLM-Idaho Public Affairs Specialist, I know about Idaho’s 12 million acres of BLM-managed public lands, with places like the stark Owyhee Canyonland Wilderness area, the snow-capped Tetons, or the rugged Lower Salmon River. Yet, Alaska’s vast landscapes fill the horizon on a

much grander scale—a scale I couldn’t appreciate until I was there.

Campground. I traveled a loop from Anchorage on the Glenn, Taylor, Denali, and Parks Highways over about 600 miles. I experienced the overwhelming beauty and vast autumn landscapes of the Matanuska Valley, Eureka, Mendallna Creek, Chugach and Talkeetna Mountains, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, Gulkana Wild and Scenic River, Paxson Lake, the Tangle Lakes Archaeological District, Delta Wild and Scenic River, Alaska Mountain Range, Maclaren and Susitna glaciers and river corridors, Denali National Park, Denali State Park, and much more. Along the way, I visited BLM’s Glennallen Field Office, Paxson Lake Campground, Gulkana River Trail, Clearwater Creek Wayside, and Sourdough and Brushkana Creek campgrounds. I participated

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Through Their Eyes: First-time Volunteers

Campbell Tract's National Public Lands Day

Here is a glimpse from first-time volunteers at the Sept. 24 National Public Lands Day celebration, cosponsored by the BLM Anchorage Field Office and the Municipality of Anchorage, on BLM's Campbell Tract.

In the morning, about 150 volunteers of all ages completed outdoor projects. In the afternoon, about 300 people attended the Campbell Creek Science Center's annual open house and gold panned, disc golfed, climbed a rock wall, joined REI's bike winterizing class, tied knots, hunted on a scavenger hunt, played games, ran, listened to bluegrass-swing-jazz band Slapdash, or wrote their outside activities on a flag and inserted where they did them on a foam-core map of Anchorage.

Vanessa Rathbun



In January I joined the Friends of the Campbell Creek Science Center Board. I like the kids working on projects, because when they grow up they'll bring their kids to help out on National Public Lands Day.

~Megan

My user group, the Anchorage Equestrians, is out here on Campbell Tract regularly. I volunteered today to help maintain and preserve the trails for all the user groups.

~ Karen



Vanessa Rathbun

Vanessa Rathbun



My daughters and I are out doing our part today, since we come here often to use the trails. We volunteered by clearing vegetation around the Campbell Airstrip Trailhead parking lot.

~Angie

Vanessa Rathbun



My favorite part was trimming the plants in the butterfly garden!

~Josephine

We came out to beautify public lands and give the girls a chance to do outdoor work and community service.

~ Girlscout Troop 930



Vanessa Rathbun



Floating on Air

Packrafting Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River

That first day didn't feel like much of a float trip. Our packrafts were buried deep in our packs and Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River wasn't yet in view, so it felt like backpacking.

My friend Jim Herriges and I had traveled three hours up the Steese Highway for our three-day Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River float using packrafts—small, lightweight, one-person inflatable rafts that roll up to the size of a sleeping bag. More and more of our friends have raved about packrafting. This up-and-coming sport has brought considerable change to whitewater boating in Alaska. We were eager to try it out for ourselves.

We had both floated Birch Creek before in canoes. On this trip, we planned to hike in and out of the river, floating the heart of what is usually a week-long trip that starts and ends on the Steese Highway. Altogether, we would traverse a 33-mile loop, with one day of floating bracketed by two days of hiking.

Before we could even get our rented packrafts wet, we faced an eight-mile hike over the high ridges of the BLM's Steese National Conservation Area from Harrison Creek, where we parked our vehicle. The warm, sunny weather and occasional caribou drifting through the brilliant fall tundra colors made an inspiring hike.

We camped that night near the end of the ridge, and then bushwhacked several miles down to high-running Birch Creek. We inflated our rafts on a muddy riverbank, arranged our gear and packed important items in waterproof *dry bags* inside our backpacks.



Craig prepares the packrafts by using a nylon inflation bag.

On the River

Packrafts are barely bigger than their occupants. I strapped my backpack onto my raft's bow and wriggled under a waterproof spray-deck to sit on the raft's inflatable seat. It was a snug fit with my feet tucked beneath my pack and my back pressed against the stern, but it felt comfortable once I was in place with a kayak paddle in hand.

On the water, the packrafts were maneuverable and responsive, although they handled much differently than canoes.

The first few rapids were fun, but then I encountered a few stability problems—perhaps due to my sitting position, pack arrangement or inexperience—and eventually went for a brief, unplanned swim. Luckily, my personal flotation device, dry bags and warm polypropylene clothing layers all served me well!

A few miles downstream at Birch Creek's three

biggest rapids, I decided I was out of my league. Luckily, portaging my backpack and five-pound packraft around the rapids was a breeze.

Jim is a more accomplished whitewater paddler who has kayaked the Grand Canyon, so he made a smoother transition to packrafting than I did. After careful scouting, Jim successfully ran all three rapids while I watched from shore. With each run, he emerged wearing a huge grin on his face.

"I was surprised at how well [packrafts] paddled and handled," he said. "Not quite like paddling a hard-shell kayak, but a lot less like paddling an innertube than I expected."

Below the major rapids, we enjoyed a leisurely float past intense yellow hues of aspens and birches headed toward winter. A flick on the paddle and my packraft spun easily around, giving me a wonderful 360-degree panorama of tundra-covered ridges fringed with stands of spruce.

We floated the river until 10 p.m., enjoying the late evening sunshine on the nearby ridges and surprising three caribou swimming across the river. We made our second camp on a broad gravel bar beneath a huge hill where we would start our hike back to Harrison Creek the following morning.

“The packraft is the single most liberating tool for exploring wilderness—cheaper to maintain than a boat, easier to maintain than a kayak, and even float up to your imagination.”

—Roman



Craig McCaa



Craig McCaa

Birch Creek far below, Jim hikes back along the trip's starting point on Harrison Creek.

Up and Over

Neither of us was looking forward to breaking trail up the side of the 2,000-foot-high ridge back toward our vehicle. Luckily, our route went over a hillside that had burned numerous times in the last 15 years, leaving a relatively brush-free route to the top. We huffed and puffed our way up the hill, knowing what awaited us

on top—sweeping views, caribou and late-season blueberries—would be worth the climb.

Finally reaching our vehicle after a long, sunny day of hiking, we reflected on how packrafts made this trip different from our previous visits to Birch Creek. Jim shared he originally thought the chief

benefit of packrafts was the flexibility of access they provide – being able to float more rivers than you could reach with other kinds of boat, and doing so without having to use aircraft.

However, on this trip he learned the combination of hiking and floating fundamentally changed the travel experience. “I discovered that hiking ridges and gliding along a river all in the same trip adds a lot to the trip. The change in perspective—from ridge top to valley floor—affects how the landscape appears,” he said.

We both liked the opportunity to alternate between the physical exertions of hiking and paddling. After tiring our legs on day one, it felt good to sit and paddle on day two. By day three we looked forward to hiking again.

Roman Dial, widely considered the pre-eminent Alaska packrafter, has described both of these aspects of packrafting—the hiking/paddling contrast and moving more completely through the landscape—as central to his 25-year-long enjoyment of the sport. In his book *Packrafting!*, Dial wrote:

“My favorite use for packrafts is crossing wild landscapes where rivers run free and the only trails crossing the country are made by wild animals. It is there, when I grow tired of walking, that I can

boat, and when I grow tired of boating, I fold up my raft and hike over the ranges to another river to paddle again.”

Driving back to Fairbanks, it struck me that the word “packraft” itself neatly combines two pieces of gear essential to Alaska outdoor adventure. In a similar way, the sport of packrafting combines the mountain and the river, and the hike and the float into a new and exciting experience. Packrafts, and the types of travel they allow, will definitely change how Jim and I plan trips on waterways and trails on BLM-managed public lands in Alaska.

—Craig McCaa
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Packrafting in Alaska

The earliest reports of packrafting in Alaska start with the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic adventure race in 1982, when a racer surprised his competitors by pulling a raft out of his pack. The state's limited transportation options, natural wonders and adventurous travelers have since made Alaska a packrafting mecca. Early packrafters used military-surplus survival rafts or relatively fragile vinyl rafts for crossing or floating down Alaska rivers. An upswing in packrafting's popularity during the last decade has much to do with a quantum leap in the quality and availability of packrafts. Today's packrafts are lightweight, rugged and agile enough to run serious whitewater. Businesses in Anchorage and Fairbanks rent packrafts for those wishing to give it a try before investing \$800-\$1000 to purchase their own.



Craig McCaa

Caribou pass the hikers on a ridge paralleling Birch Creek in the Steese National Conservation Area.

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Project for Hope and Healing

Project Healing Waters helps military families at BLM's Delta Wild and Scenic River corridor

Imagine three days of fly-fishing in the beautiful Tangle Lakes area, with one of Alaska's premiere flyfishing instructors and a cadre of dedicated volunteers standing by to make sure your every need is met.

About 30 soldiers and their families had just that experience Aug. 26-28, during BLM-Alaska's first partnership with Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing. The nonprofit offers basic fly fishing, casting, tying and rod building classes and equipment at no charge for wounded active military personnel and disabled veterans in Department of the Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals throughout the country. Glennallen Field Office fisheries biologist Tim Sundlov coordinated the weekend with Project Healing Waters' Elmendorf Air Force Hospital program in Anchorage.

During the weekend, participants of all ages experienced fly fishing, casting, tying or rod



BLM Fishery Biologist Tim Sundlov helps Evan Wheeler fish on Tangle River.

building for the first time at BLM-managed lands in the scenic Delta Wild and Scenic River corridor, which includes the BLM Tangle Lakes Campground, Tangle Lakes and nearby Gulkana River. Others took their children berry-picking along the new BLM trail on the

ridges above the Tangle Lakes Campground and participated in the 'skull and furs' workshop, where natural resource specialists from the Wrangell Institute for Science and Environment shared their knowledge of Alaska's furbearers and the area's flora and fauna. The schedule left plenty of time to enjoy brilliant tundra fall colors, catch glimpses of migrating caribou and swans, gather around campfires or simply relax in the company of other recovering soldiers and veterans.

Project Healing Waters' volunteers teach fly fishing classes on an on-going, long-term basis, with the Federation of Fly Fishers, Trout Unlimited and independent fly fishing clubs conducting the program with help from sponsors such as the BLM. Judging from the widespread interest in the weekend—more than 300 military families initially expressed interest in attending—this year's successful partnership may be the first of many.

Find out more at <http://www.projecthealingwaters.org> and <http://www.blm.gov/ak/st/en/prog/fisheries.html>

Assignment Alaska —continued from page 2

in the BLM-partnered Project Healing Waters weekend for recovering soldiers and their families, and met many employees from the BLM and their partner organizations.

Every turn in the road revealed something new and exciting, like migrating tundra swan, moose, caribou, arctic ground squirrels, thick spruce forests and beautiful glacial vistas. I visited tundra for the first time. I picked ripe tundra blueberries, though I slipped and dropped a gallon on the trail. I experienced Alaska mosquitoes. I spent one evening with folks of all ages around a campfire as the stars came out and I heard the story of authors David Suzuki and Sarah Ellis, *The Salmon Forest*. I tried my hand at flyfishing for Arctic grayling in the Delta Wild and Scenic River. I was even almost hit by a fleeing caribou on the Denali Highway.

I will never forget working at BLM-Alaska or that weekend road trip. It reinforced the pride I have about the resources BLM manages, the opportunities these lands provide and the magnificent scope of Alaska's landscapes. I also realize I experienced only parts of what the Glennallen and Anchorage Field Offices have under their purview and it whetted my appetite to return someday to experience more of BLM-Alaska.



I was almost hit by a fleeing caribou on the Denali Highway.

—Kris Long
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FRONTIERS *Flashes*

News from around Alaska

National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska Lease Sale is December 7

On Wednesday, Dec. 7, BLM-Alaska will hold an oil and gas lease sale within the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A). The agency is offering 283 tracts (3,060,176 acres) within the Northeast and Northwest NPR-A in this sale. There are currently 169 authorized oil and gas leases in the Northeast and Northwest planning areas of the NPR-A, totaling 1,361,105 acres.

Firewood for the Hearth



Collin Cogley

Eagle residents remove free firewood, which was cut and stacked by the Alaska Fire Service Midnight Sun Interagency Hotshot Crew. The crew spent eight days last July removing around 135 cords of dead aspen trees adjacent to trails and roads at historic Fort Egbert. Removing dead trees reduces wildland fire risk, improves forest health and protects the historic resources. BLM-Alaska issued free permits to 42 local residents for up to three cords of wood.

New Trail at Tangle Lakes Campground



Kris Long

The Tangle Lakes foot trail gradually ascends out of the newly renovated Tangle Lakes Campground and provides spectacular views of Round Tangle Lake and the Delta Wild and Scenic River Corridor. It is also a great place to find berries in season.

Invasive Plants get the Boot



Collin Cogley

To complete his Eagle Scout award, Dawson Lewandoski worked with BLM's Eastern Interior Field Office to install boot brushes at six BLM trailheads along the Elliott and Steese highways last August. The brushes remove invasive weeds from visitor shoes. Twelve boy scouts and leaders from Troop 92 in Ester helped Dawson make and install the brushes.

Iditarod National Historic Trail at the Fair



Teresa McPherson

BLM-Alaska's Iditarod National Historic Trail Centennial exhibit at the 2011 Alaska State Fair drew visitors from near and far. It seems everyone has heard of the Iditarod Trail, from Alaskans to visitors from as far away as Japan, Denmark and the West Indies, according to the exhibit's visitor registry. Here an exchange student from Japan learns about the trail and its history from her Alaskan host family (above).



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BLM-ALASKA FRONTIERS... From the Managing Editor

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This summer, I saw some of BLM-Alaska in a way I'd never experienced before. My family hosted BLM-Idaho Public Affairs Specialist Kris Long on a 600-mile loop from Anchorage to photograph Project Healing Waters at the Tangle Lakes area. Although I'd been working with images and information about BLM-managed resources in this area, actually seeing, breathing, feeling it—and watching others do the same—brought it alive!

This issue is about first perspectives and looking at BLM-Alaska in new and different ways. We hope these stories will encourage you to get out and experience what BLM-Alaska has to offer. If you can't visit in person, sign up to 'follow' [@BLMAlaska](https://twitter.com/BLMAlaska) online on Twitter. However you do it, don't miss out. Experience more of BLM-Alaska as I did. With 75 million acres under our management, we have many stories to share and experiences to discover. Thank you for taking time to read *Frontiers* and discovering some of what we offer.

— Karen J. Laubenstein
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BLM-Alaska Frontiers

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